

ALCOHOL

CHANGE<sup>UK</sup>

# Exploring social support and identity in recovery: a photovoice study

Sarah Rhynas, Lisa Schölin, Fiona Cuthill,  
Brandon Walker, Aisha Holloway

Dr Sarah Rhynas  
Nursing Studies  
School of Health in Social Science  
University of Edinburgh



THE UNIVERSITY  
of EDINBURGH

# Background

- Sustained recovery is a challenge which takes energy, commitment and support.
- Recovery capital (human, physical, cultural and social) is key to understanding how people enter and sustain recovery (Cloud & Granfield, 2008)
- Connections with multiple social groups and transition into groups that don't support substance use shown to influence the recovery journey (Zywiak et al., 2002)
- Social identity theory provides insights into social aspects of recovery in relation to adapting new social identities, which appears important in recovery (Dingle et al., 2015)
- The aim of the current study was to further explore the role of social support and identity in recovery using photography

# Photovoice

- A participatory action research method developed in the 1990s by Wang & Burris (1994)
- Focusing on describing experiences of the world from people's own perspective with the specific goals to;
  - "(1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns,
  - (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and
  - (3) to reach policy-makers" (p. 370, Wang & Burris, 1997)
- Previous work in Edinburgh has used photovoice to explore the experiences of alcohol in the environment among people in recovery (Shortt et al., 2017)

# Methods

- Eight participants were recruited through a local recovery café with the help of a peer researcher
- Initial workshop describing the project and learning some photography techniques
- Photos taken over eight months
- Data collected in individual interviews and focus groups mid-way and at the end of the project
- Ethical considerations: identification and consent, health and safety
- Data analysed using thematic analysis and discussed with peer researcher

# Results

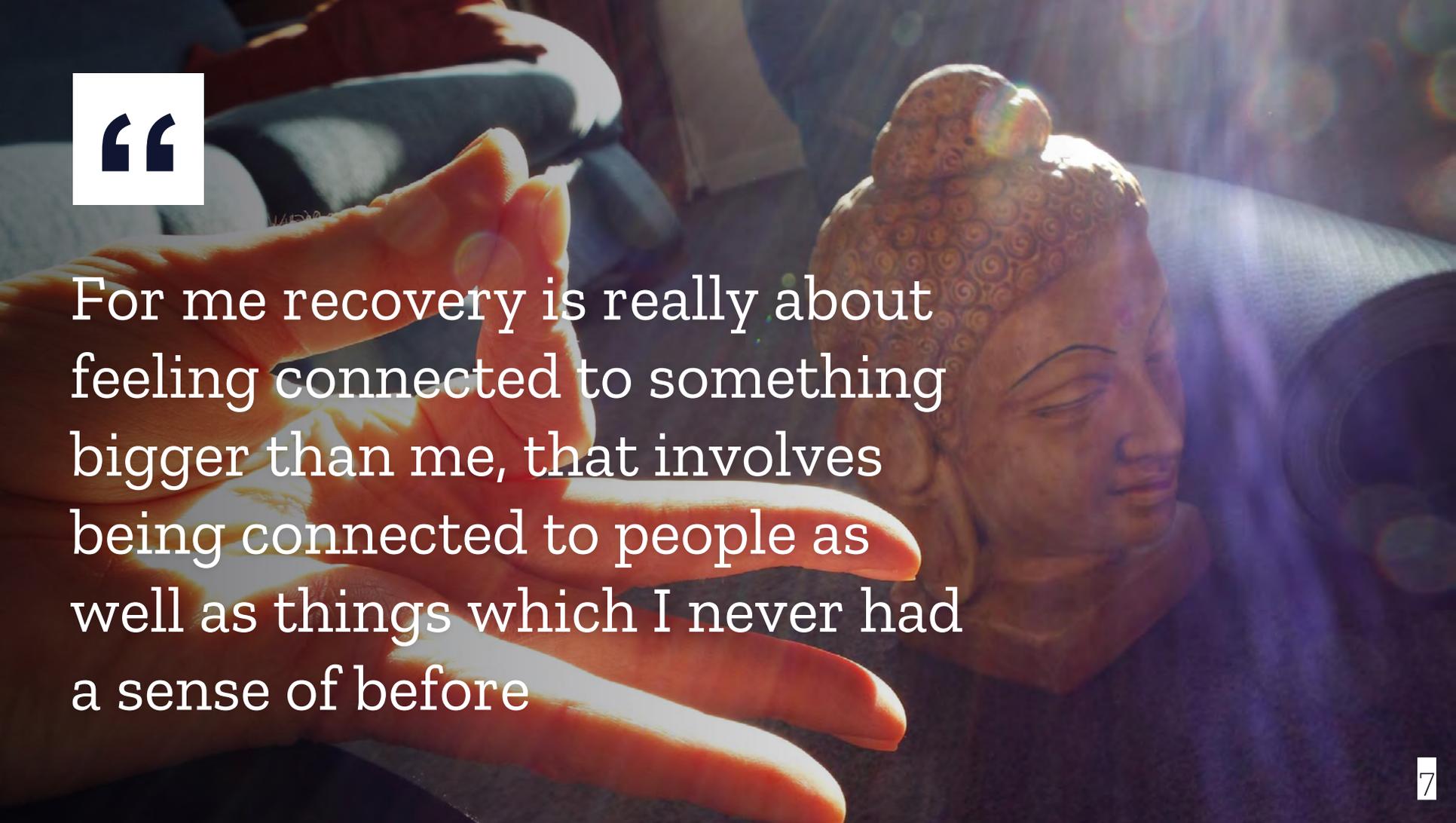
- 'Active ingredients' – abstinence, support networks, planning and organising, finding peaceful places, attending meetings, safe social spaces
- Core concepts helped participants establish their recovery identity
- Connectedness and valuing themselves was key part of developing a recovery identity, much helped by the support they were able to receive and give back within the recovery community
- Importance of visible role models, demonstrating positive lives in recovery



# Results

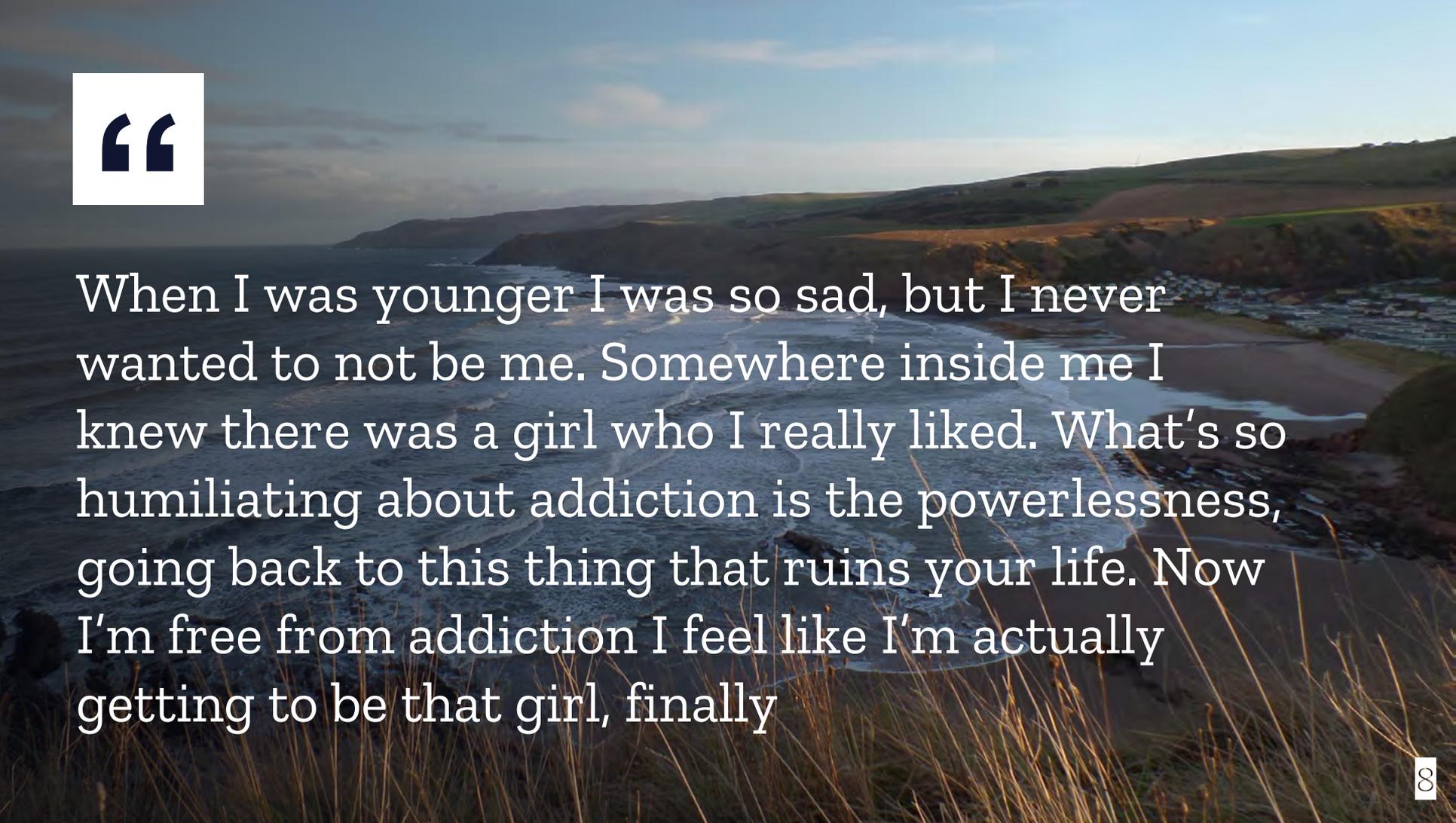
- With the anchor of established recovery, people can reach for new opportunities, take new steps and consider social and personal 'risks', developing new identities
- These steps may take people away from volunteering and peer support as lives are filled with work, relationships and new challenges
- New relationships may be less clearly linked to recovery with less focus on that defining characteristic



A person is shown from the waist up, sitting in a meditative posture on a blue mat. Their hands are resting on their lap in a mudra. In the background, a large, golden Buddha statue is visible, illuminated by warm, golden light. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and spiritual.

“

For me recovery is really about feeling connected to something bigger than me, that involves being connected to people as well as things which I never had a sense of before



“

When I was younger I was so sad, but I never wanted to not be me. Somewhere inside me I knew there was a girl who I really liked. What's so humiliating about addiction is the powerlessness, going back to this thing that ruins your life. Now I'm free from addiction I feel like I'm actually getting to be that girl, finally



It's a year in the life. Back when I was in active addiction, because I was a polysubstance user, I couldn't give you one whole year of my life in one go



# Conclusions and reflections

- Key concepts play part in accessing and sustaining recovery over time and help 'anchoring' people in a recovery identity
- Increasingly secure new identity allows people to reach for new adventure, exploring new networks and portrayals of self
- Key message that participants wanted to share was that recovery is real, aspirational and possible but is also hard work
- Methodological reflections - using photovoice for abstract topics – capturing identity, longer term projects, revisiting participants
- Sharing stories in the recovery community vs in research setting



Any questions?

Email: [Sarah.Rhynas@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Sarah.Rhynas@ed.ac.uk)

# References

- Cloud, W. and R. Granfield, Conceptualizing Recovery Capital: Expansion of a Theoretical Construct. *Substance Use & Misuse*, 2008. 43(12-13): p. 1971-1986.
- Dingle, G.A., et al., Breaking good: breaking ties with social groups may be good for recovery from substance misuse. *Br J Soc Psychol*, 2015. 54(2): p. 236-54.
- Shortt, N.K., S.J. Rhynas, and A. Holloway, Place and recovery from alcohol dependence: A journey through photovoice. *Health & Place*, 2017. 47(September): p. 147-155.
- Wang, C. and M.A. Burris, Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment. *Health Education & Behavior*, 1997. 24(3): p. 369-387. 17.
- Wang, C. and M.A. Burris, Empowerment through Photo Novella: Portraits of Participation. *Health Education Quarterly*, 1994. 21(2): p. 171-186.
- Zywiak, W.H., R. Longabaugh, and P.W. Wirtz, Decomposing the relationships between pretreatment social network characteristics and alcohol treatment outcome. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 2002. 63(1): p. 114-121.

**Background photos:** <https://www.pexels.com/photo/man-person-camera-taking-photo-1838/>; <https://www.pexels.com/photo/people-in-motion-going-through-a-doorway-2224890/>; <https://www.pexels.com/photo/curve-design-futuristic-lines-911738/>; <https://www.pexels.com/photo/gray-and-black-marble-slab-1451474/>; <https://www.pexels.com/photo/grayscale-photography-of-people-sitting-on-chair-1884585/>; <https://www.pexels.com/photo/grayscale-photo-of-human-hand-2050590/>; <https://www.pexels.com/photo/gray-folding-camera-on-white-surface-1422224/>; <https://www.pexels.com/photo/abstract-background-black-and-white-board-935871/>; <https://www.pexels.com/photo/antique-aperture-blur-camera-370659/>